

A Quick-Start Guide to Planning Your Novel, Novella, or Short Story

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Introduction

Welcome to my quick start guide to writing your novel! While I wrote this specifically for NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month), it can be used by anyone who wants to quickly prepare to write a novel, novella, or short story.

This guide is broken down into a few basic things that you'll need to get started. The main thing to remember is that writing a story is an adventure. Adventures in real life can range from the meticulously planned to completely spontaneous. Your writing and planning will be likewise and will vary from person to person. You can add and delete to these lists and scenes as your story progresses, or you can change nothing and rest assured that you're starting your adventure with the basics you'll need to finish the journey.

First, you'll want to develop your world a little bit by creating your **Settings** and **Characters**. Don't worry about getting every character and setting on this list – you can always add to it as need be.

Once you know who and where your characters are, you need to know what they are doing. The **Plot Summary** will help you identify the significant milestones of your novel, providing a nice overview of the entire story.

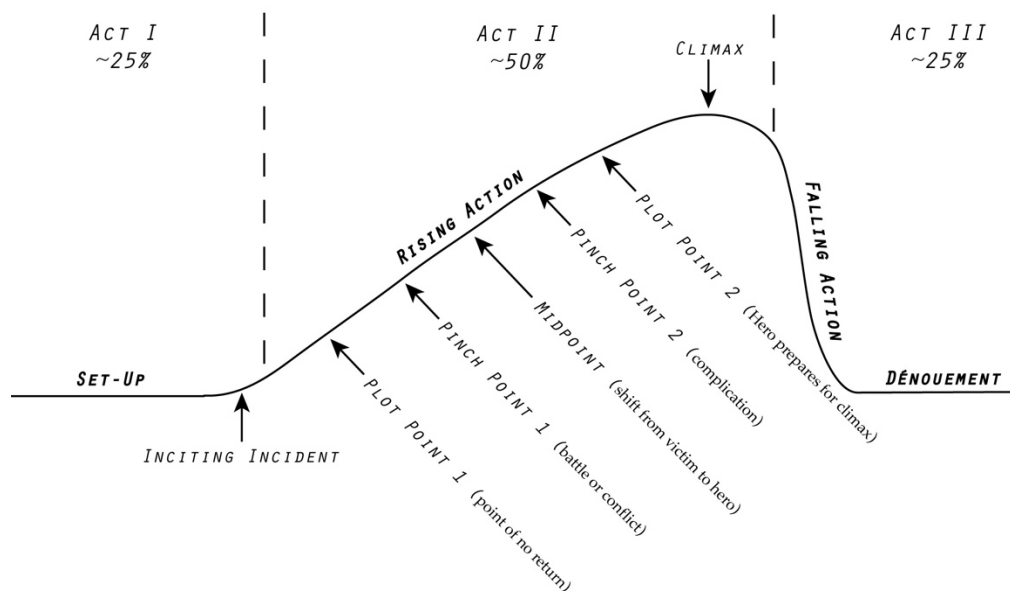
The next step is where the nitty gritty comes into play – your **Plot Outline**. This provides a snapshot of each individual scene in the entire story. From these snapshots, you'll have all the information necessary to write that scene. These can be re-ordered, deleted, or augmented as need be.

Feel free to print out or photocopy as many of the Settings, Characters, or Plot Outline worksheets you need for your purposes.

Best of luck on your writing adventure and *Happy Writing!*

Plot Summary

Basically, what we are talking about here is outlining your story's Three-Act Structure. There are many different versions of this basic structure out there, but all are essentially just derivatives of Freytag's Pyramid from the times of Aristotle. Stories have a beginning, middle, and an end. A pretty simple concept that can be greatly nuanced. Most stories follow this structure in one way, shape, or form, but general guides have been developed. Here I provide you with one such example, but feel free to change or add to this as you see fit. For example, some stories may be a series of smaller rising actions followed by smaller falling actions rather than a build up to one great climax through one rising action followed by a fast falling action. Do what works for you, but you should use this opportunity to denote the major events and incidents that occur in your story.



In the diagram I provide above, there are three acts – the Set-Up (beginning, ~25% of the novel), the Rising Action (~50%), and the Falling Action (~25%). There is an inciting incident that propels the protagonist into action at the end of Act 1. Halfway through the Rising Action of Act 2 there should be a midpoint crisis of some kind where the protagonist changes from being passively action to proactive. At the end of Act 2 there is the Climax of the story. Act 3 is everything that happens after “the bad guy has been defeated” ending with the wrap-up, the dénouement. These percentages of length are very rough estimates. I find that my stories tend to have a much shorter Act 3, augmenting the length(s) of Act 1 and/or Act 2.

The Characters

| Name | Role | Traits |
|------|------|--------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Examples of TRAITS include: appearance, personality, profession/education, idiosyncrasies, good/bad habits, weaknesses, fears, hopes, dreams, strengths, secrets, etc.

The Settings

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

11. _____

12. _____

Plot Outline

Here you'll actually plan your entire story. How many scenes should your story have? The only real answer to that is "however many you need." In my own opinion and those of many others I've heard speak of this, don't try to have scenes that are too long. I personally try to limit my scenes to ~2500-3000 words. Some scenes are shorter, a few are longer, but that's what I aim for. I like to put 2-3 scenes in a chapter, others prefer that each scene be its own, shorter chapter. It's up to you – you're the writer!

There are two general types of scenes, and they are called different names by different people. I'm going to stick with Action and Reaction. The first goal is to identify what kind of scene you will have. Action scenes are ones that progress the storyline toward the climax. Reaction scenes are ones where we give the characters and readers time to react to what is happening, often though not necessarily through reflection or conversation. A well-paced story will have an ideal blend of these two types of scenes. If a story has too many action scenes, the readers can get worn out trying to keep up. If a story has too many reaction scenes, then the story drags and the readers get bored. A reaction scene should come after any reaction scene where major action occurs or major information is provided that needs to be processed.

Next, identify the **setting** and **characters** that will be involved. After this, write down the **goals** you wish to accomplish in this scene. This is generally a quick synopsis of what's happening in the scene and what needs to actually happen in that scene. At the end of the scene, there should be some kind of **setback** for the protagonist (usually reaction scenes) or a **conclusion**/revelation of some kind (usually reaction scenes). These are meant to propel the story forward and make the reader want to turn the page – 1-2 sentences at the very end of the chapter. Space is also provided for additional notes that you may want to add about this scene.

Together these scenes tell your story. Now you just have to write the words that will glue them all together.

Scene # _____

| Scene Type | Action Reaction |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Setting | |
| Characters | |
| Goal | |
| Setback/Conclusion | |
| Special Notes | |

Example from the first outline of my novel, Lunar One

Scene # **3**

| Scene Type | Action Reaction |
|---------------------------|---|
| Setting | <i>Amia's unit, having family dinner</i> |
| Characters | <i>Amia, Lora, Griggor</i> |
| Goal | <i>Hint that there may be some danger to the Stage that Amia is unaware of. Introduce holodecor concept. Amia expects her mom to be upset and her dad to be supportive, but instead her dad is furious and her mom is deeply worried. This confuses Amia. Her mother warns her to be careful.</i> |
| Setback/Conclusion | <i>Amia wonders why her mother is so worried about something as safe as the Stage.</i> |
| Special Notes | <i>Add a small scene after this where L and G are in their room afterwards terrified for their daughter's safety, even her life. Then, go back to Amia and have her wonder why they are so worried.</i> |